

NO IDLE THREAT

By

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Jesus sent the apostle sent under the most severe warning of the kind of treatment they should expect to receive. They would be as sheep in the midst of wolves; they would be delivered up to councils and scourged in synagogues; some would be delivered up by family members and put to death; they would be hated of all men for Christ's sake. They would be treated as Jesus had been treated (Matt. 10:16–25).

But they were to have no fear of their persecutors. “Fear them not therefore.” They were to proclaim the message from housetops. Then came this somber warning: “And be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna” (Matt. 10:28).

In a recent religious publication this verse was quoted to support the idea that the soul is immortal. Apparently the writer read only half of the statement. It is true that man can kill only physically. The death he inflicts is not final, nor total. The body returns to dust and the spirit returns to God, and man has done all he can do. But God is unlimited in His power to give life and to destroy.

There is a parallel passage in Luke. “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But...fear him who after he has killed has power to cast into Gehenna. Yes, I say unto you, fear him” (Luke 12:4–5). Rather than teaching that every person has an immortal soul this teaches that God is able to kill the whole person.

Jesus is careful to use the term, “Gehenna.” Your Bible may have the word “hell” here, but if you look in the margin or the footnotes, you will notice that the original word in the Greek is Gehenna. This term is used only in such places where the final destruction of the unredeemed is discussed. It was taken from the Valley of Hinnom, a cursed place just southwest of Jerusalem which from ancient times had been associated with death. It was a site of child-sacrifice to Moloch (2 Kings 16:3, 21:6), and was the place Jeremiah said would be filled with Israelite corpses when God judged them for their sins (Jer. 7:31, 33, 19:2–13).

The term was eventually shortened to Gehenna, and became the incinerator for the citizens of Jerusalem, so it was associated with whatever was corrupt, useless and fit for nothing else. As in the ordinary city-dump, the dead animals were discarded there, along with every imaginable kind of refuse, that it all might be consumed by the fires which burned there day and night. It was a place crawling with maggots, so that it was the place “where the worm dies not and the fire is unquenched.”

There is nothing about Gehenna to give anyone the idea that it was a place where people were confined alive for the purpose of torture. It was by no means a prison-house, and there is no way that the words of Jesus can be construed to say that we should fear God because He might put us in a great prison of the universe and keep us there forever. In the clearest words possible, He warns of the possibility of being totally destroyed in Gehenna.

Many argue that while God does have such power to destroy man completely, He will not do so, but will keep him in a state of insufferable pain and agony for eternity.

They teach that when God says that the soul that sins shall die He means “spiritual separation;” that death as the wages of sin is not death as the opposite of life, but rather a spiritual estrangement from God. All of this twisting of the simple meanings of scripture is necessary in order to sustain the traditional idea that all souls are immortal and therefore those who are unredeemed by Christ, will live forever under severe punishing. According to this theology everyone must “spend eternity” somewhere, for while God is able to destroy the wicked, He will never do so.

But consider what this makes of the warning Jesus gave. Is it honest to give a warning against what might happen when you know of a certainty that it never will happen? We are all familiar with the parent who continually threatens the child: “If you do that again I’m going to...” but never carries out the threat. Even a child can figure this out so that the threat is ineffective. The child even loses respect for the parent and develops a problem of insecurity.

Would Jesus go this route? The answer must be a definite NO. Jesus never made an idle threat. When he warned that God is able to destroy the person, body and soul, we can be sure that He will do so. Furthermore, the means by which the destruction is accomplished is consistent with the warnings given in other places and by others with divine authority. That is, by fire.

John the Baptist warned against a fiery judgment. He said of Jesus that His “fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly cleanse the threshing-floor; and he will gather his wheat into the garner, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12). Chaff that is left over after the harvest is not thrown into the fire for the sake of preserving it, but in order to be rid of it. The fire is unquenchable in that no one can put it out. That doesn’t say that it will not go out when it has consumed all that is cast into it.

The apostle John also used fire in this sense, but changed the figure. He writes of a “lake of fire” into which all the unredeemed are cast (Rev. 20:15; 21:8). Peter brings all the figures together in his explanation that the “heavens that now are, and the earth, by the same word, have been stored up for fire, being reserved against the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (II Peter 3:7). Further on he says that “the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (Vs. 10). The object of the final fire, just like the purpose of Gehenna, the threshing floor and the lake of fire, is to burn up all that is cast into it.

Life is possible only by divine power. It is created by God, for there was not a part of a person in existence until Adam was created. Paul declared that God “gives to all life and breath” (Acts 17:25). Life is a gift of God and cannot be sustained apart from Him. Jesus claimed that He had the power to give life to whom He would (John 5:21). What would be the point in such a claim if everyone had life that could never end? Of course, there is more to eternal life than mere existence, and the quality of life for the redeemed in the resurrection will be infinitely greater than the very best of life here. But this is not the point Christ makes. He compares life and non-life. To the believer He offers life; to the unbeliever He gives warnings of Gehenna and destruction of life.

The promise of immortality and incorruption is given exclusively to the redeemed. All will be raised up in the last day, but some will be raised to “the resurrection of life” and some to “the resurrection of judgment.” We have already seen that the result of the judgment is execution by fire.

Mainstream religion from the time of Plato has taught that something about man is immortal, indestructible. It is as if God creates something He could not get rid of. Dr. Frankenstein made a man who turned out to be a monster, then he found he could neither control him nor get rid of him. Are we to think that God has created a “soul” that He cannot bring to obey Him and yet cannot destroy? Most church creeds would answer, Yes, Such a “soul” must go on living in some form, somehow, and since it cannot have eternal joy in the presence of God, there must be a place where all such “souls” live separated from God forever.

If God alone can give and sustain life, how are all these sinners, separated from God, going to receive life? Consider also the fact that Scripture teaches that only a small percentage of all humanity will be saved to receive immortality. Thus the world of the condemned would be many, many times greater than the world of the redeemed. This would be a terrible defeat for Christ, for once the judgment is past, scriptures is emphatically clear that there will be no change in the status of anyone, as far as redemption is concerned.

What a contradiction the mainstream theologians have invented: Christ died to meet the penalty for our sin, but the penalty turns out to be not death but life under miserable conditions. Christ promises to give life to all who truly believe in Him, but then, He also gives life to all who do not believe? God gave His Son that whosoever believes on Him should not perish but no big deal; no one else perishes either, they go on living with the majority. Christ threatens destruction of body and soul in Gehenna, but pay no attention; the soul cannot be destroyed.

Such is the confusion when the simple truth is encrusted with the matted layers of traditional philosophy and man-made creeds!

Jesus spoke plainly to the apostles. They had no need to fear the world and what men could do to them. The world is perishing. It is already judged and under sentence. True, it can cause you suffering, and even put you to death. But that death is only temporary. Martyrs have gone singing to the stake because they looked for a greater life in the resurrection.

God is the only one to fear, for He is able to cast man into the lake of fire “which is the second death,” where all is destroyed (Rev. 20:14–15).

Let no one think that this is too light a punishment. Just this week as I write this the media is filled with the news of protests over the execution of a convicted murderer. They think this punishment is too severe. Certainly it is the most severe punishment the courts can inflict. No one can describe the horror of that person as he comes to the last hour, knowing full well that he is to forfeit his life. Even the suicide often struggles desperately to undo his work to avoid death.

Then what must it be to the one who already suffered death once, and is now raised to stand before the Judge of all the earth and be sentenced to the final and eternal death. The process of the punishment may be horrible in itself, depending on the degree of guilt before God. But the real horror is the fact that it will be the utter end; the end of being, the loss of the most beautiful and glorious opportunity imaginable — immortality in the image of God for eternity — to be thrown out, wasted, burned up in the garbage and consumed like the chaff. No wonder Jesus said “There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

God is able to destroy the whole person. It is no idle threat!

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